

November 21, 1979

Skagit Valley Herald

Flood experts eye new measures

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MOUNT VERNON – Faced with voter rejection of a flood control project for Skagit County, officials might now turn to “non-structural” measures to guard against flood damages.

In a meeting Monday to assess the situation, the Skagit County commissioners and representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed it would be futile to continue to pursue the levee improvement project (3E).

A \$14 million bond issue to finance the local share of the \$55 million project was rejected by more than 71 percent of the voters recently.

Commissioner Jerry Mansfield said he interprets the vote as a rejection of the proposed plan, not a rejection of the need for flood control.

Many “newcomers” to the county don’t realize the extent to which the Skagit River can flood, Commissioner Howard Miller said.

“The only thing that will get support (for flood control) is if we have a major flood,” Miller said. “The people will become aware of the problem again.”

The commissioners repeatedly expressed interest in meeting with county residents to work out a proposal that might be more acceptable to the majority of the county.

“We’re still very interested in flood control for the valley,” Commissioner Bud Norris said.

“I don’t think the problem went away with the vote,” Public Works Director Gene Sampley said. “It just eliminated that particular solution.”

Vernon Cook, project manager for the Corps of Engineers, said a flood damage reduction plan might be the best approach now.

This could include prohibiting construction in the flood plain, requiring flood plain insurance, removing some levees, and purchasing property in flood areas for conversion to recreational use.

These “non-structural” measures, he explained, would reduce the damages that would occur during a flood, as opposed to preventing a flood.

Cook also told the commissioners they should encourage their Congressional representatives to pass an omnibus bill now pending in Congress.

Provisions in this bill would authorize the county to study flood damage reduction measures for areas upriver of Mount Vernon, he said.

Implementation of a scaled-down levee improvement project is not likely, Cook told the commissioners, because of the poor benefit-cost ratio.

One exception is the city of Mount Vernon. “That would be the one that would probably sail,” Cook said.

Because of a high cost-benefit ratio, the city could probably proceed with its own levee improvement project, providing it with protection from a flood with a 1-in-500 year chance of occurrence.

This action could preclude other areas in the county from obtaining federal funds for flood control in the future, Cook said.

But Cook noted that Mount Vernon city officials have not expressed much interest in the project to date.